

WOODCHURCH PARISH COUNCIL

Subject: - Woodchurch Future Development Plan

1) Background

In April 2014, 235 Woodchurch residents attended an exhibition of the sites submitted by local landowners for the future parish development plan.

The Parish Council would like to thank Woodchurch residents for their extensive and knowledgeable interest. It has since received 149 site specific comments and a further 66 of a general nature. These were collated in a separate document which will be submitted to Ashford Borough Council. They were also summarised and presented to residents in a verbal report for discussion at the Woodchurch Parish Council meeting on Friday 23rd May 2014.

In informing the report, Woodchurch Parish Council analysed and/or made reference to the following, in addition to the residents' submissions

- The Woodchurch Village Health Check 2012
- G L Hearn Report - January 2014 – Strategic Housing Market Assessment
- Findings of the Ashford Rural Economy consultations January 2014, undertaken on behalf of Ashford Borough Council by Nathaniel Lichfield & Partners (NLP)
- Ashford Kent, - A Dukelease White Paper, October 2013
- The current Woodchurch Village Design Statement 2002

Whilst acknowledging a very small number of dissenting views, the report's content received a resounding endorsement by the residents, such that the Parish Council feels it has a strong mandate from them to submit this paper as further guidance for:

- development on specific sites or particular issues
- setting out a framework to guide the overall development
- articulating how key policy objectives of place-making and community building should shape any new development.

2) Summary of the key recurring points

The village's current infrastructure (especially highways, water and sewerage) cannot support more than a steady increase* (see 4) below) in housing provision over the period to 2030. Infrastructure improvements would be expensive, disruptive and environmentally damaging.

A contrived supply of housing in the village over and above a steady increase cannot be justified on economic (job growth) grounds, population growth or on the capacity of essential services to cope with a disproportionate increase in demand for them (surgery/school etc)

The Parish Council should play a key role in preserving the character of the village, its rural identity and sense of place including measures to preserve its environment and ecology.

There is continuing support for the existing Village Design Statement and the preservation, if not extension, of the current Conservation Area. At the Parish Council meeting on 23rd May 2014, it was agreed that because this consultation had raised so many key issues, the Parish Council would investigate the feasibility of bringing residents together to deliver a future Village Plan which specifies the housing types to be built between 2016 & 2030.

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Where development is permitted, there is a preference for smaller, low cost, affordable or social housing in contrast to the vast majority of recent applications which have featured larger, middle to top end, market housing homes.

Parking and road traffic management is becoming a key problem for the village. This is especially true of Lower Road, which has become a “rat-run” to and from Ashford and is particularly congested and dangerous. Front Road has witnessed 2 serious accidents in the past few months. Adding large concentrations of family dwellings will inevitably increase traffic movement and the likelihood of further serious injury.

3) Re-affirming the findings of the Village Health Check 2012

In 2012, work was undertaken to assess the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the village. The exercise informed the business plan for the Woodchurch Community Information Centre.

In terms of social life the following were considered as key weaknesses

- Growing influx of counter-urbanists
- Few facilities for young people

The key threats in this module were

- House prices
- The decline in traditional rural way of life

In terms of the local economy the weaknesses were

- High percentage of retirees and economically inactive
- Shortage of affordable housing
- Limited opportunities to develop the infrastructure
- Shortage of pre school childcare places
- Slow broadband speeds

The threats were

- Competition from urban centres
- Diminishing trade locally
- Public sector budget reductions leading to eg less Police cover

In terms of the environment the weaknesses were

- Increasing number of vehicles
- Increasing urbanisation

The threats were

- More vandalism and crime
- Negative impact of more vehicles - air quality/ congestion
- Localised light pollution
- Pressures on agriculture

In terms of transport provision, the weaknesses were

- Dispersed population with large groups of elderly/social housing located outside the recognised village centre
- Badly maintained roads
- Reduced evening/late night bus services
- Need to travel to access secondary health care services

And the threats -

- Increased rat-runs/ difficult junctions
- Increased reliance on the car
- Social isolation for those without cars (elderly/ young)
- Further reduction in public bus services
- Ageing population

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These findings led to 4 key objectives for the new Centre which were to improve the sense of belonging, encourage a sense of enterprise, a sense of curatorship and a heightened sense of place. As a result of the health check, The Parish Council concluded that 2 central principles should underpin the sustainable development of the village and provide the overall context for the production of a future plan.

These are **place making** and **community building** and should be uppermost in the minds of decision makers, developers and service providers at every step of the development process.

The concept of place-making, which has already been established to some degree in the Woodchurch Village Design Statement should be used to describe the overall objective of creating places with a strong identity. In Woodchurch's case, the residents clearly want to retain a strong rural identity. The Parish Council feels it now has a responsibility to develop not only the fabric but also the spirit of the place by, amongst other things, ensuring new development is appropriate and locally distinctive and by ensuring quality in the village's design and function.

Woodchurch's future development is also underpinned by an aspiration to retain and foster a strong and self-sustaining community where people continue to have a real sense of neighbourliness and belonging. A number of residents have remarked that one of the key benchmarks of quality in a community is measured by the degree of social interaction. The Parish Council agrees with that and already invests in social interaction including community engagement plans and the Woodchurch Community Information Centre project. The Parish Council feels it has a mandate to ensure Woodchurch's current high score in this area is maintained and developers bringing forward planning applications are able to demonstrate a commitment to delivering community engagement.

4) Defining "steady increase"

There is strong consensus in the village that an average of 3 new homes per annum to 2030 would be a manageable and steady increase in keeping with the village's place making and community building aspirations.

The Parish Council supports the residents' views that

- a) there is no justification for substantially increasing market housing supply in Woodchurch to meet population growth or future job growth targets**
- b) the future supply of housing will be met through the normal development control planning processes**
- c) the village should resist market pressures to convert land currently in agricultural use or on brownfield sites to residential use to satisfy any contrived population growth**

Reasons

1. According to critics of the Hearn report, there are already around ten thousand homes in the planning system which would provide a level of housing now for the next 20 years.
2. From local taxation data we know Woodchurch accounts for circa 3.5% of the current rural housing in the Borough. On a strict arithmetic basis, Woodchurch's share of any additional housing assessment would be around 40 of the 11800 homes suggested by the Hearn report over the next 15 years after taking planned developments elsewhere in to consideration, notably Chilmington Green, Conningbrook Lakes, Tenterden, Wye and Ashford itself
3. The key employment hot spots in the Borough are elsewhere. NLP identified that the heaviest clusters of employment outside the key centres of Ashford and Tenterden are along the M20 corridor, primarily to the North of Ashford.

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4. The growth in rural employment does not require a commensurate number of homes - NLP also identified that in Ashford's rural areas, one of the highest increases in employment since 2001 has been the growth of self employment and home working.
5. 75% of the rural workforce already reside within Ashford Borough with the remaining 25% in-commuting from nearby Shepway, Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells. However, Ashford can call upon a workforce of 1.7 million within an hour's drive time
6. Claimant unemployment in the Ashford Borough area has increased by 96% since 2004 leaving a residual, already-housed workforce.
7. Woodchurch is already an attractive commuter location and numbers could be substantially increased if more pressure is put on landowners to convert especially agricultural land to supply a contrived population growth created by future "big ticket" developments such as the extension of the McArthur Glen Retail Outlet, the extension of HS1 (Ashford to Bexhill with a stop in Rye) or an expansion of Lydd airport.

5) Rural Industry

In addition to point 4 above, commercial market feedback has confirmed that the main driver of demand are expanding home-based enterprises and small businesses seeking lower cost space in locations close to where the owners live and/or are serving a local market.

The residents and the Parish Council consider this has 2 key implications

- 1) **It supports the assertion that job and population growth is not a solid reason for increasing market housing supply in the village.**
- 2) **That in addition to defining optimum housing growth, the Parish Council may want to preferentially support certain types of industrial applications coming forward through the planning process.**

6) A mixed and balanced community

The Parish Council supports the residents' view that the village needs a sustainable and well balanced future development offering housing choice and a range of opportunities for local leisure and recreation. Recently the balance has been tipped in favour of larger market homes in the village centre with affordable, social housing and homes for the elderly predominantly located on the periphery of the village. This has made place making and community building more difficult.

The Parish Council feels it is correct to support those residents that commented on the need to plan for smaller accommodation for the following reasons

- 1) **The Ashford Rural East area has a particularly low representation of social rent tenure (Source: NLP) at only 7% which is around 50% of that in other rural areas of Ashford.**
- 2) **It is reasonable to assume that that smaller market housing accommodation will be needed in the future to enable the ageing population to relocate to more manageable properties - especially those with ground floor bathrooms and bedrooms.**
- 3) **The need for low-cost, key worker accommodation in the village centre has increased with the opening of an 83-bed residential care home and the aspiration to integrate its nursing and auxiliary staff, some of which are from BME groups, in to the local community.**

In essence, smaller, low-cost market or social housing will be increasingly needed to satisfy the needs from young families and key workers to the increasing numbers of elderly resident

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7) Conclusions

There is consensus in the village that in order to fulfil the place making and community building objectives in Woodchurch;

- a) There is no justification for more than a managed and gradual growth of between 40-45 new dwellings over the next 15 years. Larger housing developments should be located in the areas of greatest need - to support job and population growth hotspots, reduce reliance on the car and to assist the urban and town centre renaissance of Ashford itself.
- b) An examination of the number of windfall planning applications coming forward over the past few years (ie ones where the site has not been previously identified for housing) would suggest that the target of 45 dwellings in the period can be met through the normal plan preparation process
- c) From the meeting on the 23rd May 2014, the Parish Council believes it has a strong mandate from local residents to object in principle to any proposed market housing development of more than 6 dwellings* and/or where the development is seen as the first stage of a larger market housing development. This includes all the current submissions which potentially exceed 6 dwellings including the site "WOOD1" (82-120 Front Road) which was the only site for housing included in the previous Tenterden and Rural Sites Development Plan. Planning permission was refused on WOOD1 on appeal in 2013. At the Appeal Hearing, Ashford Borough Council (ABC) was unsuccessful on a technical point in its refusal of the housing mix. (*6 dwellings is deemed to be 2 years' notional supply of housing in the village)
- d) Local residents are eager to point out that the Planning Inspector recommended to ABC that it should be clearer when defining what should be built despite Policy 6.151 for the WOOD1 site clearly saying "*A mix of terraced and semi-detached properties here would create an interesting contrast with the frontage development to the south of the site but would mark the change of prevailing dwelling type seen further north along both sides of Front Road, within the Conservation Area*"
- e) The developer successfully argued that ABC had failed to define 'housing mix' in their Development Plan and therefore he was free to choose what that should be. Therefore his choice of all 3/4 bedroom high-end housing for WOOD1 did not contravene the Plan. Also he was not obliged to develop more than 0.5 hectare and thus trigger some low cost development. Although ABC scored on the latter point, the Inspector conceded the technical point on housing mix and ruled in favour of the Developer on this count.
- f) From the experiences of WOOD1, the Parish Council agrees with residents that it is unlikely that developers will want to build anything other than high-end, highly profitable housing in Woodchurch. Thus the village will not achieve any smaller or lower value housing except by limiting the development to small scale progressions. The Parish Council feels the opportunity now exists to specify the future use of this site for smaller accommodation in line with g) and h) below
- g) The Parish Council believes it has a mandate to preferentially support high quality, market and affordable housing of up to two bedrooms consistent with the existing Village Design Statement to satisfy the expected future demand from a local ageing population and key workers.
- h) The Parish Council believes it has a mandate to take positive action to address the under-representation of social housing tenure in the village
- i) The Parish Council should preferentially support the provision of small scale office and workshop units on brownfield sites capable of accommodating up to 5 employees to satisfy the demand from expanding start-up businesses.